

**Benedek Láng:**

**Were east-central European royal courts more tolerant  
vis à vis astrology and magic in the 15th century?**

Determining the magnitude of someone's tolerance towards something is always an issue exposed to debates. It is relatively simple to state or deny singular facts in the research of magic, astrology and alchemy, however, it is extremely problematic to speak about general tendencies. Taking an often disputed example, the tolerance versus intolerance of the medieval Church towards astrology in the fifteenth century is exactly such a tendency. One can list convincing arguments on both sides.<sup>1</sup> Another issue of tendency is the central topic of this article, that is, the degree of tolerance in Western European and East-Central European courts towards magic.

By the complicated and tiresome expression of "East-Central European courts", by and large the royal courts of Krakow, Prague and Buda, that is centers of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary will be understood throughout this paper, the three countries that joined the Western Christendom with some belatedness around the year one thousand, and where many phenomena related to literacy – including the reception of magic – developed with some delay as compared to France, Spain and England.<sup>2</sup> This delay caused a kind of contrast between the Western and the East-Central European countries, different phases of European intellectual history coexisted at the same time, and led to certain tensions. To give an example, it is no exaggeration to say that the reception of magic in 15<sup>th</sup> century East-Central European courts reminds us of the enthusiasm and optimism with which the much earlier western courts of Alfonso the Wise and Frederick II welcomed magic texts and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Carey, *Courting disaster: astrology at the English court and university in the later middle ages*, London 1992, B. Dooley, ed., *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, Leiden 2014.

<sup>2</sup> J. Szűcs, « The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An Outline, » *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 29 (1983), 131-184, G. Klaniczay, « Medieval Central Europe: An Invention or a Discovery? » in Lord Dahrendorf, Y. Elkana *et al.*, eds., *The Paradoxes of Unintended Consequences*, Budapest 2000, 251-264, *idem*, « The Birth of a New Europe about A.D. 1000: Conversion, Transfer of Institution Models, New Dynamics, » in J. P. Arnason and B. Wittrock, eds., *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissance*, Leiden 2004, A. Gieysztor, *L'Europe nouvelle autour de l'An Mil. La Papauté, l'Empire et les « nouveaux venus »*, Rome 1997.

In an earlier publication of mine (published in 2008), a claim was made for a difference of attitudes towards learned magic in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>3</sup> The claim was not too strong, I did not argue for an exodus of magician troops leaving Madrid and Paris and marching towards East Germany, Krakow, Prague and Buda in the hope of royal appreciation and warm welcome. Rather, I pointed out a relative territorial difference. In this article, I wish to reappraise the issue, and this reappraisal can of course be easily challenged or criticized exactly because general tendencies rather than singular facts and stories but are at stake.

How did the situation look like in Europe in the years around 1400? This period – as many scholars have documented – testify to an acceleration of trials of necromancy and sorcery. Persecution of magic became more accentuated in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> Well known events can be listed both on the level of trials and executions – the case of Jean de Bar being the best known – and on the level of condemnations of popular superstitions, invocation of demons, divination, talismanic magic, and even medical and judicial astrology – one can think of the famous list issued by the University of Paris in 1398 or the treatises of Jean Gerson (not unrelated to the condemnations of the University)<sup>5</sup> or those of John of Frankfort, Nicholas Jawor, and Henry de Gorkum on German territories.<sup>6</sup> The debate is still open on how exactly these condemnations and persecutions paved the way to the subsequent witch-hunts, but all scholars – including Norman Cohn, Richard Kieckhefer, Michel Bailey and Jean-Patrice Boudet agree that the increasing criminalization of learned magic was one of the decisive components of the witch hunt trials to become intense in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> B. Láng, *Unlocked Books, Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe*, University Park, PA 2008.

<sup>4</sup> J-P. Boudet, « La genèse médiévale de la chasse aux sorcières: Jalons en vue d'une relecture, » in N. Nabert, ed., *Le mal et le diable: leurs figures à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris 1996, 35-52. R. Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300-1500*, London 1976, *idem*, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century*, Stroud 1997, M. D. Bailey, « From Sorcery to Witchcraft: Clerical Conceptions of Magic in the Later Middle Ages » *Speculum* 76 (2001), 960-990, N. Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt*, New York 1975.

<sup>5</sup> J-P. Boudet, « Les condamnations de la magie à Paris en 1398, » *Revue Mabillon*, Nouvelle Série, 12 (2001), 121-157.

<sup>6</sup> F. Bonney, « Autour de Jean Gerson: Opinions de Théologiens sur les superstitions et la sorcellerie au début de 15<sup>ème</sup> siècle, » *Le Moyen Age* 77 (1971), 85-98.

<sup>7</sup> See note no. 4 above.

In contrast to these tendencies, a fairly different, more appreciative approach characterized the position of learned magic in the East-Central European royal courts. Details of this picture can be examined on four different levels: a) in the rulers' self-representation, b) in the composition of royal book collections, c) in the university professors' interests, and d) in the activities and conflicts of court magicians and astrologers. Going through these details, it becomes apparent how closely the reception of magic was related to the appreciation of astrology on all levels, even though – needless to say – differentiation between the two disciplines was strong in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Second to astrology, medical science also provided space to the reception of magical texts, this took place, however, only to a smaller extent.

It was astrology that opened the gates to magic in the court of Wenceslas IV, king of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor. The ruler's interest in astrology is testified among others by the fact that he employed court astrologers, one of whom was Christian de Prachatitz, the would-be rector of the University of Prague. Wenceslas' book collection – of which very little remained, and thus we are happy for any partial reconstruction of it – include major works on astrology by Ptolemy, by Arabic authors, by Michael Scot, and also anonymous texts. Inserted among these, we find shorter texts of divination (on geomancy and name magic) and even ritual magic.<sup>8</sup> Wenceslas had a copy of the famous *Bellifortis* as well, the major work of Konrad Kyeser on strange methods of military technology, which were probably never put into practice. It was not a real military handbook, but rather a beautiful and appealing storybook that was meant to entertain the population of the court. The *Bellifortis* incorporated many astrological elements besides alchemy, magic lamps and fires, and even demons. This magical content must have been really popular, since further copies of Kyeser's book had become widespread, it appeared in various courts of smaller and greater significance. A copy of it can be identified in the book collection of Wenceslas' brother, the next Emperor and Hungarian king, Sigismund of Luxemburg. Sigismund was depicted in the book on one piece of the astrological image series, actually representing the Sun. This image has become quite well known, because this is one of the very few contemporary representations of the emperor.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. Krása, *Die Handschriften König Wencels IV*, Vienna 1971, M. Bartlová, « The Magic of Image: Astrological, Alchemical and Magical Symbolism at the Court of Wenceslas IV, » in B. Szeghyová, ed., *The Role of Magic in the Past: Learned and Popular Magic, Popular Beliefs and Diversity of Attitudes*, Bratislava 2005, 19-28.

<sup>9</sup> C. Kyeser, *Bellifortis*, ed. G. Quarg, 2 vols. Düsseldorf 1967; W. Eamon, « Technology as Magic in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, » *Janus* 70 (1983), 171-212, *idem*, *Science and*

Astrology played an even more crucial role for another owner of Kyesser's *Bellifortis*, King Matthias of Hungary, whose representation policy, book collection (the representative Corvinian library), and even political actions were closely related to astrology. The conscious intellectual program of employing court astrologers, inviting foreign intellectuals involved in the celestial sciences (to which some degree of magical interest can be also added) and using astrological representations on frescos in the court was not Matthias' invention. His master and friend, Johannes Vitéz, first Bishop of Várad, later Archbishop of Esztergom, built up this model in the episcopal court of Esztergom in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, which his pupil, the king – in spite of their political conflicts – followed and significantly amplified.<sup>10</sup>

Matthias employed court astrologers, asked for their advice before military actions, decorated the ceilings of his library rooms with astrological poems and illustrations. He invited astrologers and astronomers to his newly founded university, the *Academia Istropolitana* in Bratislava (that was actually not called Academia Istropolitana at the time), among them: Johannes Regiomontanus (1436-1476), Martin Bylica de Olkusz (1433-1493), and supposedly even Galeotto Marzio (ca. 1427-ca. 1497) – though his participation in the project is far from being proven. King Matthias' contacts with the humanists of Florence, Marsilio Ficino and others are also well known, including the fact that the third book of *De Vita Triplici* incorporating an important part of hermetic knowledge was originally dedicated to him. The Italian humanist Galeotto Marzio emphasized the Neoplatonic, scientific, and astrological interest of the king that included, according to the author, even divinatory methods. Another Italian humanist, Antonio Bonfini (1427-1502) described how the king surrounded himself with astronomers, doctors, mathematicians (meaning also astrologers), and did not even abhorred magicians and necromancers.<sup>11</sup>

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*the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, Princeton 1994, 68-71; L. White, « Kyesser's 'Bellifortis': The First Technological Treatise of the Fifteenth Century, » *Technology and Culture* 10 (1969), 436-441; *idem*, « Medical Astrologers and Late Medieval Technology, » *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (1975), 295-307. R. Leng, *Ars belli: Deutsche taktische und kriegstechnische Bilderhandschriften und Traktate im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden 2002, 19-21 and 109-149.

<sup>10</sup> T. Klaniczay, and J. Jankovics, eds., *Matthias Corvinus and the Humanism in Central Europe*, Budapest 1994.

<sup>11</sup> L. S. Domonkos, « The Origins of the University of Pozsony, » *The New Review: A Journal of East-European History* 9 (1969), 270-289; A. Gabriel, *The Medieval Universities of Pécs and Pozsony: Commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> and 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their foundation, 1367-1467-1967*, Frankfurt am Main 1969; T. Klaniczay, « Egyetem Magyarországon Mátyás korában » (University in Hungary in

While King Matthias and his Neoplatonic Corvinian library are fairly well researched topics, and the astrological and magical interests of the king are not new to scholars, many details are still unknown both in his correspondence and his self-representation. How exactly astrology, physiognomy, Hermetism and certain forms of magic were appreciated in his Renaissance court deserves further analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Besides royal enthusiasm, power representations and book collections, East-Central European Universities are also to be taken into account in our survey on magic. It is important to emphasize that Polish, Bohemian and Hungarian universities were founded according to a different pattern than English, French and Northern Italian universities. This pattern involved a strong royal initiative. The foundations of *studium generale* in Prague in 1348, in Krakow in 1364, Vienna in 1365, in the southern Hungarian town of Pécs in 1367 were all due to a royal decision. The need for a large number of reorganizations and re-foundations (Vienna in 1384, Krakow around 1400, the University of Óbuda in 1395 and 1410 instead of the already disappeared University of Pécs, and finally the University of Bratislava replacing the already disappeared University of Óbuda) was due to the very same reason: many of these young and fragile institutions hardly survived their founding ruler. As a consequence of this dependence, intellectual processes going on in a university mirrored much closer the fashions of the royal court than in Western Europe, the fate of universities and that of royal courts had stronger interconnections.

It is hard to give a description of these universities in general, because they were different in nature and intellectual orientation. They also differ in the survival rate of their source material. Yet, a fairly objective general claim can be made on their appreciation of astronomy and astrology in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Celestial sciences were taken seriously in this part of the world in the century predating Copernicus. Professors of the University of Bratislava were already named, another list of astronomers' names can be mentioned from the University of Vienna, while the Krakow University can be called without any exaggerations a

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the age of Matthias), *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 94 (1990), 575-612; J-P. Boudet, D. Hayton, « Matthias Corvin, János Vitéz et l'horoscope de foundation de l'université de Pozsony en 1467, » in *Actes du colloque «Mathias Corvin, les bibliothèques princières et la genèse de l'Etat moderne»* Budapest 2009, 205-13; D. Hayton, « Martin Bylica at the Court of Mathias Corvinus: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Hungary, » *Centaurus* 49 (2007), 185-198, A. Végh, « Egy Reneszánsz felirat töredékei és a budai királyi palota csillagképei, » (Fragments of a Renaissance inscription and the celestial signs of the Buda Palace) *Művészettörténeti értesítő*, (2010), 211-232.

<sup>12</sup> See Enikő Békés' contribution in this volume.

center for astronomical and astrological studies. Its two chairs – the first founded by Johannes Stobner after 1400 for the study of astronomy, and the second founded by Marcin Król of Zuravicza after 1450 for the study of astrology – offered scientists and astrologers to a great number of Italian, German, and East-Central European universities (faculties of arts and medicine) as well as princely and royal, bishopric and pontifical courts.<sup>13</sup> This high esteem was a fresh phenomenon. As Mieczysław Markowski pointed out: in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the first years of the 15<sup>th</sup>, distinguished doctors of canon law distanced themselves from astrology, and criticized astrological prognostications. By the second half of the century, however, several masters of the university regarded it as a science and profited, even financially, from its practice.

The book collections of these masters – together with those of the medical magistri – enjoyed better surviving rate than those of the 15<sup>th</sup> century East-Central European monarchs and princes. It is no surprise how far astronomical, astrological and medical texts dominate these codices. What is more surprising is that hermetic, divinatory, talismanic and even ritual magic texts also appear in a great number scattered among scientific texts, to such an extent, that certain codices became real magic handbooks. These handbooks have been described in details,<sup>14</sup> it suffices here just to list a few of them. Two copies of the four surviving *Liber runarum*, a hermetic text of talismanic content survived thanks to Krakow magistri. The first long and only illustrated version of the *Picatrix* is from this university. The beautiful and well known decanic and planetary images of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of its second book provided – in all probability – a model to a series of illustrations in the royal palace, the Wawel.<sup>15</sup> (This is already the third instance, besides the episcopal palace of the Hungarian archbishop, Johannes Vitéz in Esztergom, and the Buda library of king Matthias, where frescos decorating a court building advertise astrological-magical interest.) Many brief talismanic texts attributed to hermetic authorities can be added to this list together with a great variety of divinatory texts belonging to the field of geomancy, to the genre of the “sphere of life and death” and to

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<sup>13</sup> M. Markowski, « Astronomie und der Krakauer Universität im XV. Jahrhundert, » In J. Ijswijn and J. Paquet, eds., *Les universités à la fin du Moyen Age, Actes du congrès international du Louvain (26-30 mai, 1975)*, Leuven 1978, 256-275, *idem*, *Astronomica et astrologica Cracoviensia ante annum 1550*, Florence 1990; G. Rosińska, ed. *Scientific Writings and Astronomical Tables in Cracow: A Census of Manuscript Sources (XIVth-XVIth Centuries)*, Wrocław 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Láng, *Unlocked Books*, 79-123.

<sup>15</sup> S. Mossakowski, « La non più esistente decorazione astrologica del castello reale di Cracovia, » in L. Szczucki, ed., *Magia, astrologia e religione nel Rinascimento*, Wrocław 1974, 90-98.



palmistry. Classic works on natural magic are also widespread, particularly in the medical codices. Shorter excerpts from the *ars notoria* also survived, which is not particularly surprising, because they were widespread in whole Europe by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. What is relevant here is not just the mere presence of such texts but rather their important share in the books of scientific content. And the situation is quite similar if we look at similar professorial book collections in Prague, while – alas – from the professors of the Universities of Pécs, Óbuda, and Bratislava, no books have survived.

All these interests and preoccupations were of course not without the reaction of university authorities. However, official condemnations and even mentions of magical practices were rare. In the first years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the *Acta Rectoralia* of the Krakow University refers to chiromantic and necromantic practices among students, one of them possessing a book entitled *Speculum necromancie*.<sup>16</sup> Another note from 1517-18 refers to chiromancy as a forbidden art. In Prague, university *quodlibets* discussed whether foretelling the future, practicing *piromancia*, *hydromancia*, *geomancia*, *nigromancia*, *spatulamancia*, or the use of amulets, herbs, and stones against demons are efficient or not,<sup>17</sup> even though these discussions were not particularly condemnatory.

And that is almost all! The whole century following serious, often capital punishments of magic in Paris passed without a proper condemnation list issued in East Central Europe, even though practices and interests of magic were more than scattered in the universities of this region, books on natural, image, and demonic magic, as well as divination and alchemy, were not missing from the shelves of the book collectors.

Having reviewed first certain monarch's interest and second, the professorial libraries, it is time to examine what kind of models for the role of the court magician existed, and what kind of conflicts and persecutions such models inevitably provoked. Fortunately, at least five stories survived which can be contrasted with the case of Jean de Bar: the exile of Conrad Kyeser, the trial of Henry the Bohemian, a letter on Nicholas the Hangman, the conflict of John of Laaz and the story of Nicholas Melchior. These people can be all called court magicians to a certain extent, and all of them are relevant for the present purpose because all of them encountered certain conflicts.

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<sup>16</sup> W. Wisłocki, ed., *Acta rectoralia Almae Universitatis studii Cracoviensis*, Krakow 1893-1897, 1. vol. no. 1988, no. 2052, no. 2598.

<sup>17</sup> J. Kejř, *Kvodlibetní disputace na pražské univerzitě* (Quodlibet Disputations at the Prague University), Prague 1971.

The author of the above mentioned *Bellifortis* (the magical-alchemical military handbook that was beautifully illustrated and a copy of which was available in the libraries of several courts of the region), Conrad Kyeser (1366-1405), was originally a German mercenary captain, but most probably also a trained physician and engineer.<sup>18</sup> He led the life of a typical free-lance intellectual; he spent some time in several courts, the most important of which was that of Wenceslas, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia. He spent the last years of his life in exile, and nothing is more appealing than to suppose that the reasons for his exile were related to his magical interest. However, nothing supports that he was exiled because of the magical recipes in his writing, the amulets, rings, mixtures and practices described in great details, or because he listed the exceptive arts, geomancy and alchemy in his classification of sciences, and called the *artes theurgice*, that is, magic, “the most sophisticated branch of the mechanical arts.” Nota bene, the final version of the *Bellifortis* was written when he was already away from the court – thus, he could not be banned because of the content of the *Bellifortis*.

The real reason was probably – as William Eamon supposes – that he might have played the role of the court magician (in the book, he depicted himself summoning demons), and he might also have been involved in the political conflicts of the court. “Deliberately projecting an image of himself as a powerful sorcerer,” he became the victim of this image, which could have been used against him in the courtly intricacy.<sup>19</sup> This image was not a good point when Sigismund of Luxemburg deposed his brother, Wenceslas, and – as it happens in such cases – systematically dismissed his brother’s supporters from the Imperial court.

A few decades later, Henry the Bohemian found himself in a similar situation somewhat more to the north, in the Polish court. He was an astronomer, a fairly influential member of the court, which is indicated by the fact that he was present at the birth of the three sons of the king, and he even cast their horoscopes. But in 1429, he found himself accused of conjuration of demons, necromancy, and the propagation of Hussite ideas. He was almost executed, since this was not his first court case (he was a *relapsus*). Among other charges, he was also accused of doing treasure hunting with the help of certain university masters.<sup>20</sup> Demons were

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<sup>18</sup> For Kyeser’s life, see G. Quarg, *Bellifortis*, XIX-XXV.

<sup>19</sup> W. Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 68-69; and *idem*, « Technology as Magic, » 190.

<sup>20</sup> S. Wielgus, « *Consilia* de Stanislas de Scarbimiria contre l’astrologue Henri Bohemus, » *Studia Mediewistyczne* 25 (1988), 145-172, B. Láng, « Angels around the Crystal: the Prayer Book of King



also mentioned just as the fact that he kept forbidden necromantic books (about the identity of which nothing is known). It is not known how Henry's involvement in politics influenced the trial, but more signs seem to indicate that in contrast to Kyeser – whose close relationship with the king had become a charge against him – Henry's high connections rather helped him avoid capital punishment. What is more, he was more in danger because of his Hussite inclinations, and not because of this magical activity. Treasure hunting, crystallomancy, invocation of demons and the possession of necromantic books – that Henry all confessed – only complemented the charges, they did not make the case more serious, that is why it can be assumed that they were more real than slanders. Royal support saved his life, he was only imprisoned.

One can plausibly suppose that Henry was the author of the enigmatic *Prayer book of king Wladislas*.<sup>21</sup> This book is a rare example of treasure hunting, combining a series of prayers and incorporating parts of the *Ars notoria*, the *Liber visionum* of John of Morigny, and methods of crystallomancy. The text is written for the king who was looking for treasures and wanted to know the hidden thoughts of his subjects. If Henry was responsible for this text indeed, it is hard to imagine deeper involvement in magical studies in his part, and yet, as every sign shows, all this only made up for the lighter part of the charges. Either he was the author of the prayer book of King Wladislas or not, this unique source demonstrates how high esteem surrounded certain forms of magic in the court that was not openly demonic, but submerged deep in the category of ritual magic and crystallomancy.

While the charge necromancy played but a secondary role in Henry's case, in the case of the Nicholas the Hangman, the possession of magical handbooks, crystals, and mirrors was treated as a criminal activity. The story is known from one single letter that survived in the binding of a manuscript. Even though the story reminds the reader more of fairy tales than real historical events, there is no reason to doubt its authenticity. Anna Cilly, Queen of Poland, wife of Wladislas Jagiello wrote it in 1410 to the pope, John XXIII. She described the details a trial led against Nicholas who had actually been a hangman (*communiter in terris multis tortor appellantur*). A Dominican inquisitor led the investigations and came to the

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Wladislas and the Treasure Hunts of Henry the Czech, » *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 5 (2005) 1-32.

<sup>21</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson liturg. d. 6. Ryszard Ganszyniec, and Ludwik Bernacki, eds. *Modlitewnik Władysława Warneńczyka w zbiorach Biblioteki Bodlejańskiej* (Władisław Warnencyk's Prayer Book Kept in the Bodleian Library), Krakow 1928.

conclusion that Nicholas used crystals, talismans, seals and also a mirror to foretell the future. They even found a book “*cum inculptis solis et lune figuris*” in his house. He was finally found guilty in practicing the art of necromancy (*exercicio artis nigramancie*), according to Anne’s letter, and was expelled from the city. The case is exceptional not so much because it involved a well-equipped magician with a rich inventory of image magic and crystallo-mancy, but rather because a queen and a pope were changing ideas about his case. If the document is really authentic, it is a particular case where the highest royal actors intervene for the fate of a magician.<sup>22</sup>

An opposite intervention is documented in the case of another queen from the same family of Cilly and the Bohemian alchemist, Johannes Lasnioro (John of Laz). The story goes that John met the widow of Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg, Barbara of Cilly, on several occasions. According to the source – of which only a much later copy has survived – the queen was deeply involved in alchemy, but she was a cheater. When Laz exposed her tricks and deceptions, she wanted to jail him, and he could hardly leave with peace.<sup>23</sup> This story – printed in the eighteenth century and allegedly originating from 1440 – is not independent of the malign rumors concerning Empress Barbara, and even if it has little to do with what actually happened, it is quite informative about the usual conflicts between court magicians and alchemists and their protectors (or protectresses).

The last case to be quoted here belongs again to the field of alchemy. It involves a famous text that already Carl Gustav Jung analyzed, who was particularly interested in the way how this text incorporated the symbolism of the Christian Mass. The *Processus sub forma missae* (*Process in the Form of the Mass*), was written by a certain Nicolaus Melchior, and dedicated to Wladislas Jagello, King of Hungary and Bohemia. The content is a curious incorporation of the alchemical process in the framework of the Holy Mass. The identity of Melchior is still debated. Was he an important member of the court, the would-be archbishop and well-known humanist of his time, Nicolaus Olah (1493–1568) as many have supposed? Or the name Melchior was a pseudonym behind which another 16<sup>th</sup>-century humanist was hiding? Or was he simply a less important no name member of the royal household? This is

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<sup>22</sup> Dipl. BJ 610. H. Zaremska, *Niegodne rzemiosło: kat w społeczeństwie Polski 14-16 w.* (Undignified Craft: Hangmen in Polish Society from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century), Warsaw 1986, 102-103; and R. Ganszyniec, « Krystalomancja » (Crystallo-mancy), *Lud* 41 (1954), 256-339.

<sup>23</sup> H. Kopp, *Die Alchemie in älterer und neuerer Zeit*, vol. 1, Heidelberg 1886, 160-161.

still debated. But the very fact that someone felt right to dedicate such a text to a king certainly deserves attention. This testifies that the royal court was perceived as a place potentially interested in practical magic and practical alchemy, and sometimes the king and sometimes the queen were seen as potential protectors and meceanas.<sup>24</sup>

What conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these instances of the courtly magician models? Nicholas the Hangman, Nicholas Melchior, Henry the Bohemian, Johannes Kyeser, and John of Laz had all somewhat problematic fates. Several of them were accused of similar charges as Jean de Bar: possession of magic books, invocation of demons, practice of necromancy. Some of them were exiled, one put in jail but none was executed. In several cases, a member of the royal family was involved in the story with explicit interest in this or that kind of practical magic. While the magician's political influence in the royal court made the case of Jean de Bar more serious, and led ultimately to his execution, in the East-Central European area, monarchs stood on the other side, usually trying to defend the magician under trial. Meanwhile, magic handbooks including a large variety of divinatory and talismanic texts were copied by university students and masters without the slightest fear.

Does all that mean that Prague, Krakow and Buda were pro-magician places? One has many arguments supporting this claim, but there are two issues to emphasize. The first is related to sample taking. What can be collected from East-Central Europe are anecdotal evidences. It is hard to compare the percentage of serious persecutions with the cases which were not so serious, because only a few cases are documented at all. In order to decide about tendencies, we do not need only examples, we rather need to calculate correlations. It is quite natural that in a larger sample there are more cases of oppressions. In Western Europe, more evidence survived for persecutions, but – as the sample is considerably larger – the number of the tolerance cases is also higher – one can think of the large number of elaborated *ars notoria* manuscripts which can be seen as a sign of the popularity and relative tolerance of magic.

The second issue is related to the belated processes in the East-Central European countries as compared to Western Europe. Not only the phenomena of literacy and institutionalization were somewhat belated, but also what Claire Fanger defined as the

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<sup>24</sup> N. Melchior « Processus Sub Forma Missae a Nicolao Melchiori Cibirinensi Transilvano, ad Ladislaum Ungariae et Bohemiae Regem olim missum, » *Theatrum Chemicum*, vol. III, Ursel 1602, 758-761; C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, London 1968, 397; G. F. Kiss, B. Láng, and C. Popa-Gorjanu, « The Alchemical Mass of Nicolaus Melchior Cibirinensis: Text, Identity and Speculations, » *Ambix* 53 (2006), 143-159.

positivization of magic.<sup>25</sup> Along the process of positivization, subcategories of magic were formed and increasingly differentiated from each other. Some of them could be better tolerated, while other forms were increasingly persecuted. This process also took place with a certain delay in East-Central European countries. The seeming and relative lack of violent persecutions may suggest that the territory was more tolerant, but it may just as well indicate that the time was shorter for subcategories of magic to spread and to cause theological concerns. And the time for courtiers to position themselves as courtly magicians in order to gain influence and to provoke political anxieties in their concurrence was also shorter. Only with these reservations can one argue for a territorial difference in the tolerance *vis a vis* magic.

## Abstract

In my earlier publication, *Unlocked books*, I argued for a regional difference between Western and East-Central Europe, as far as tolerance towards astrology and magic was concerned. Since the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, strong condemnations of magical texts were issued at the University of Paris, among others, and a more accepting attitude can be detected at the universities of Krakow, Prague, and Bratislava. What were the institutional reasons for this relative tolerance? How far was it related to the popularity of astrology and magic in the royal courts of the region? How far was it the consequence of the self-representation of certain sovereigns? The article attempts to answer these questions, discussing also how far this "tolerance," which can be documented on the basis of the source material, might be the result of the historian's bias.

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<sup>25</sup> C. Fanger and F. Klaassen, « Magic III: Middle Ages, » in W. Hanegraaff, et al. eds. *Dictionary of Gnosis*, Leiden 2005, 724-725.